

CHAPTER 11

Foray into Forums: Standing Out from the Crowd



Coming Up!

Debates don't only take place between two teams. There are often many different perspectives at play. This chapter will show you how to emerge as a leader in forums. You'll find out how to set the agenda, strike a compromise, build a coalition, and speak in an engaging way.

WHEN TWO SIDES AREN'T ENOUGH

Having only an Affirmative team and a Negative team has certain advantages. The issue is clear, especially after the first speaker defines the terms. There's an obvious fault line that divides the opposing teams. Since each side knows exactly what it has to argue, this format certainly makes for good practice and competition.

But do most debates have only two perspectives? If you think about the world around you, you'll realize that there are usually many views on the same subject. Even on the same subject, there are many different sub-issues, and each stakeholder will consider different sub-issues to be the most important ones. Below are descriptions of some of the instances when there are multiple perspectives at play.

Student Congress and Model Parliament

In democratic systems, there are numerous political parties. Each party has elected members who represent its positions in a legislature. In some instances, such as the United States Congress, there are two dominant parties. In other places, such as Canada and many European nations, there are three or more groups represented in significant numbers. A party doesn't only represent a single, narrowly defined perspective on each issue. Rather, its members represent a range of views on what's called the political spectrum. They come together as a unit because their views are reasonably similar, but there's still plenty of room for maneuvering.

In a Student Congress or Model Parliament, the core activities include developing, debating, and voting on Bills. Multiple perspectives go into the drafting of a Bill. Everyone will want to have their issues and views included. If the party proposing the Bill doesn't have a majority in the legislature, it will have to compromise or form a coalition with other members. Consequently, the backroom deal-making is often as important as the debate itself.

Model United Nations

In this international forum, you represent a country on a committee, such as the Security Council or the Commission on Human Rights. Generally, there are only one or two members advocating for your country on each committee. Therefore, deciding on your country's per-

spective is much easier than deciding on a party's perspective in a Student Congress or Model Parliament. The challenge lies in finding areas of mutual interest and agreement between countries. It's virtually impossible for one country to push through a rigid view, since other countries are unlikely to agree. This makes negotiation and compromise central to the debate.

Committee Meetings

Whether it's a school club, a student council, or a community group, you're probably part of a committee. When a committee meets, its members have goals that are more widely held among participants than in the types of forums mentioned previously. There tends not to be distinct factions. Rather, the debates are more civil and constructive, and the purpose is to decide how best to carry out the group's mandate. You shouldn't be trying to defeat anyone else on the committee, as the aim is to find consensus among all group members. Success in this type of forum debate involves leadership and engagement. Shouting down arguments made by other members is bound to isolate you and render you less effective.

Class Discussions

You've certainly been part of classroom debates on the theme of a novel or on an international affairs issue. Perhaps you've even advocated how to go about solving a math problem or conducting a science experiment. In these discussions, your goals should be to contribute to the learning of everyone in the class, to increase your own understanding of an issue, and to practice your speech and debate skills. Since you're debating with people who are your friends, the style of debate is more constructive and analytical than confrontational. There are no 'winners' and 'losers', but select people will be seen as leaders by their teacher and by their peers. Your mission should be to make sure that you're one of these people.

Success Tip!

Contribute actively
to class discussions.



A TRICKY BALANCING ACT

In a debate between two teams, the goals are simple: build your arguments and defeat your opponent's arguments. One team will win, and the other will lose. The only person you have to work with is your partner. Simply put, it's an 'us vs. them' battle.

A forum debate is much different. Not only are you trying to present your arguments, you're also aiming to work within the context of a dynamic debate to see where your points fit in and make the most impact. There are more than two distinct perspectives, making the areas of contention less clear.

You have to work with other people—*engage* rather than *defeat*—in order to achieve your objectives. In fact, your peers will have significant sway in how you're judged, as opposed to a panel of judges who are removed from the debate itself.

All of these factors require you to perform a balancing act. You have to push your perspective, but compromise may be necessary for anything to pass. Being decisive will help you stand out, but other people will want to feel that you're listening to their views. You should strive to set the agenda by promoting the issues you feel are most important, while at the same time ensuring that your comments fit with the debate. In short, people actually have to like you and want to stand with you on the topics being debated.

Success Tip!

Build relations before the forum even starts.



HOME-FIELD ADVANTAGE: SET THE AGENDA

The more involved you are in deciding what gets debated, the more influential you will be in the debate itself. There's rarely enough time to discuss every relevant issue in detail. If there are several important matters, an agenda helps structure and focus the debate. In some cases, there is a formal agenda, such as a list of Bills in a Model Parliament or a list of discussion items in a committee meeting. At other times, the agenda is more informal. The participants who lead the

Success Tip!

Strive to influence what gets debated.



debate essentially set the tone for everyone by making it clear what the key issues are. Here are some strategies that will help you participate in setting the agenda:

Jump on an issue quickly. If you're one of the first people to suggest a reasonable agenda for the debate, your issues are far more likely to be accepted. Once the key issues have been decided, adding your items to the debate may be seen as complicating and sidetracking the forum. The most effective debaters try to set the agenda before the forum even begins. They talk informally with others beforehand to gauge the mood and to suggest ideas. In a crisis committee involving rapidly unfolding events, such as a United Nations Security Council session, tackling a new event quickly will help you set the tone of the discussion to follow.

Explain why your issues are the important ones. In a sense, you're arguing why your issues need to be argued. You need to make it clear to everyone else what the forum stands to gain from debating the issues that you're suggesting. Below are some of the reasons why an issue might need to be debated promptly:

- **Urgency:** If a problem is immediate or forthcoming, claiming urgency can be a compelling reason to have your issue on the agenda. For example, an imminent civil war or a tight project deadline could be cause for urgent debate.
- **Scale:** By explaining the magnitude of a situation, you can present a powerful case to the forum for debating this issue. The enormities of a drug trafficking problem or a growing health crisis are instances in which the scale of the situation can be used to justify discussion.
- **Dependency:** In many cases, a number of important issues are dependent on the outcome of another debate. Say that a Student Council is discussing a year-end party. Debating how much should be spent on it should come before planning other items.

Think about what others will find important. How successful you are in establishing the key issues for debate depends on the opinions of other participants. Judging what other people believe is a valuable tool for proposing an agenda. One method is considering their roles and

how they relate to important issues. If you're in a Model Parliament and the Green Party is heavily represented, it's a fair bet that environmental issues will be of foremost concern. But there's a less speculative method of gauging the mood: ask them. It may seem like common sense, but it's rarely done. When you're talking to people before the forum, ask them what they see as the key issues. Listening is far more effective than mind-reading.

COMMON GROUND: STRIKING A COMPROMISE

You think you're right, and you're convinced that everyone else around you should take your view. Unfortunately, they all have their own views and—you guessed it—they think they're right as well. What to do?

Of course, you could go on with the same course, stubbornly sticking to your original position. But consider that you probably need the support of people who have other views. Good luck trying to get your fellow participants to back down and bow to your demands. Usually, you'll have to find common ground and arrive at a compromise. Here are some strategies for coming up with a mutually agreeable position:

Success Tip!

Understand what motivates other participants.



Come into the negotiation from a position of strength. At first, stake out a clear, decisive position. It's impossible to get even part of what you want if you begin with a watered-down version of what you really think. If you start with a position that's already a compromise, you'll probably have to concede even more ground to those who are pushing for a different perspective.

Think about when you used to negotiate with your parents for money to go out. (Or perhaps you still do.) You asked for \$40, they proposed \$20, and so you compromised at \$30. What if you decided to start low, thinking you would be rewarded for being reasonable? You asked for \$30, they proposed \$20, and so they felt that a \$25 compromise would be fair. Next time, you'll remember to start the negotiation a bit higher.

Watch Out!

Don't compromise or give in too quickly.



Stick firm to your most important demands. Know what you consider a top priority and what's less important. Even if you appear to take strong positions on the lower priority demands, you can use them as bargaining chips to protect what you consider vital. A demand that's less important to you may be a concession that someone with another perspective values greatly.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS: BUILDING COALITIONS

Working alone, it's rather difficult to reach your objectives in a forum. You may prefer to 'go it alone' and get all of the bragging rights if your proposal is accepted. Unfortunately, trying to be the only shining star will rarely work. Even if other people agree with you, they're less likely to vote for your ideas if they think you're trying to dominate.

Watch Out!

Don't appear to be forming exclusive cliques.



A coalition can be an effective vehicle for advancing your interests. Unlike compromising, which emphasizes bringing *ideas* together, coalition-building places more stress on bringing *people* together to promote a set of ideas. Coalitions are usually created *before* the debate, whereas compromises happen *during* the debate. In this sense, a political party is a type of coalition. Building a coalition is tricky, but the effort usually pays off by making it easier to achieve your objectives. Here are some strategies to help you build coalitions:

Watch Out!

Don't form coalitions purely on friendship.



Identify people with similar interests. Although it's rare for any two participants to have exactly the same position on a topic, it's common for numerous people to have positions with minor differences that can be bridged. For example, take a Model United Nations debate on foreign aid. One potential coalition is a group of wealthy donor nations, each having different proposals, but sharing the perspective that aid should be tied to democratic reform.

Make trade-offs to secure passage. Some coalition scenarios involve sacrifices and deals. Separate groups agree to back each other so that each one can accomplish its priorities. For example, the Conservative

Party in a Model Parliament could agree to the Liberal Party's bid for greater spending on health care. In exchange, it would receive a guarantee of the Liberal Party's support for its tax cut proposals.

Share responsibility and credit with other participants. Playing a leadership role doesn't mean hogging the initiative. Trying to dominate a coalition is a sure way to see it fall apart. Everyone is in the coalition because they feel there's something for them to gain. If they see it as a power grab on your part, they may not want to work with you. The best leaders in a coalition work to involve everyone. When an initiative succeeds, the entire team takes credit.

Success Tip!

Identify your potential allies from the outset.



ENGAGE EVERYONE: STYLE AND DELIVERY

Most of the principles of strong delivery discussed in previous chapters hold true in forums, but there are a number of techniques that are particularly important in a group situation. Here are some tips to help you appeal to a wide range of people:

Face as many people as possible. Focusing predominantly on the Chairperson, the front of the room, or the key players is a natural instinct. This practice leaves everyone else feeling 'left out' of your speech. Turning your body and your eyes toward as wide a spectrum of your audience as possible is a great way to keep all of the participants feeling engaged.

At a meeting, sitting at certain positions will help you face the maximum number of people. Sitting at certain positions? You're probably thinking, "It's a table, and you sit down anywhere. It's that simple." Actually, if you look carefully around a typical meeting table, you'll find that certain places are advantageous. These 'power positions' make it more likely that others will notice you when you want to speak. And when you do speak, fewer people will have to turn their bodies in order to face you directly.

Keep you palms open and up. The excessive use of closed-fisted or finger-pointing gestures paints an image of you saying, "Here's why you're wrong." You're essentially placing a 'barrier' between you and

everyone else. Speaking with open palms that face up or outward is a way of communicating, “I’m inviting you to join my position.” Sounds subtle and subconscious? Well, it is. But it’s a small tool that can add an extra touch to your delivery.

Show that you’re listening. In a forum, you’re communicating even when you’re not speaking. Since there are so many speakers with different opinions, everyone is struggling to stand out and to feel that they’re having an impact. Eye contact with the speaker and an attentive posture are two ways to show that you’re paying attention. Additionally, everyone likes to know that their contributions are being appreciated by the other participants. Nodding in agreement helps convey engagement and interest in the speaker’s comments. In a parliamentary forum, applauding by banging on your desk or chanting, “Here, here!” are other ways to show your agreement.

Success Tip!

Stay humble to gain respect and support.



If you remember the tips and tricks outlined in this chapter, you’ll give yourself a competitive advantage as you participate in any type of competitive or informal debate forum.

Chapter 11: Keys to Success



✓ **Provide a sense of direction to the discussion.** Suggest what needs to be discussed or what challenges should be addressed. If the forum focuses on your issues, it's more likely that you'll play a leadership role in the debate.

✓ **Keep your comments in the context of the forum.** Unless you can show why a new direction is necessary, stay focused on the issue at hand. Don't bring up points just because you've wanted to say them for some time.

✓ **Seek common ground with other participants.** Although stating your ideas confidently is important, it's essential that you're able to bring together a coalition of people or to create agreement around key ideas. Play a leadership role by suggesting ways to join forces.

✓ **Listen to what others are saying and respond accordingly.** Since the people you're trying to convince are part of the debate, you need to understand all of the relevant perspectives. Strive to understand what's motivating other participants and adapt your tactics and contributions accordingly.